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ABSTRACT

China's cultural system is based not on the strength of the individual, but on the pattern of relationships maintained by all people. In communication, the Chinese put emphasis on the receiver of messages and on listening rather than on the sender. This cultural trait, derived from Confucianism, has a significant impact on the strategies native Chinese speakers use to learn English as taught by methods based on the philosophies of western philosophers. It is important for teachers of English as a second language (ESL) to understand how Chinese learning styles and expectations reflect Chinese culture and history, and the educational system in which Chinese students would have received initial English language instruction. Personal motivations for learning are largely politically-based, reflecting national educational objectives. The rigid structure of relationships in Chinese society, including that of teacher and student, also reflect Confucian philosophy. Understanding of such concepts as filial piety, reciprocity, the irrelevance of personal feelings, and the importance of clarity in relationships can help the ESL teacher design instruction, communication, and classroom interaction. Contains 42 references. (MSE)

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Learning strategies as learning inhibitors for Chinese speakers

by

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March 1997

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Abstract

As a student of the Chinese language, I have often struggled to correctly apply the seemingly convoluted methods and guidelines taught by my instructors. In contrast, attempts to apply methods I used in learning my native language, English, to help me to learn Chinese generally failed me in some way.

I found it refreshing to discover that Jill S. Bell of York University had a similar experience, described in her informative article "The Relationship between L1 and L2 Literacy: Some Complicating Factors" (TESOL Quarterly, 29, 1995). Her conclusions had a strong effect, causing me to reflect on how her research uncannily described my own situation as a student.

Native Chinese would have the same problem trying to apply their learning strategies and philosophies of L1 to learning English as a foreign language as I did trying to apply mine to learning Chinese. The basic foundations of language learning are so dissimilar, and in fact must be, between English and Chinese that they can actively impede any significant progress in L2 language learning.

This paper will examine some of the main differences between these philosophies, and their genesis, and show how the EFL/ESL instructor, in teaching native Chinese speakers, can address these differences in philosophy head on, and perhaps forestall some of the natural impediments that might arise if they had not learned to consider why native Chinese learn in the manner that they predominantly do.

Most language educators would agree that the goal of language learning is communication. This communication can take many forms: it can mean personal interaction, reading a book, listening to a song, or writing a letter, to name a few. In other words, communication is that which enables us to process information about our world, and to also be able to transmit such information to others. All animals communicate in some form; however, humans are unique in that we communicate primarily through a complex system of verbal code called language. We can then interpret human communication to be a social process; one that, as Yum (1994) put it, "is influenced by the philosophical foundations and value systems of the society in which it is found" (p. 75).

This process we call communication will obviously reflect different operating principles and philosophies as it is defined by individual cultures. For example, the communication found among North Americans is reflective of their cultural patterns and values. Strangers refrain from asking one another such "personal" questions as how much money they earn, how many people are in their family, or what kind of car they drive. The origin for this can be found in the American's cherished sense of personal, individual "space," which no other person has the right to enter unless given permission. This emphasis on the individual and individual rights is so strong in American society that many of the constitutional laws deal with the protection of many interpreted "inalienable" individual rights.

In contrast, the questions listed above are just the sort of questions strangers ask one another in China. These types of questions are not seen as "personal" as they are in the Western sense; rather, they are important in establishing some type of common ground between the interlocutors. In other words, China's cultural system is based not on the strength of the

individual, but on the pattern of relationships maintained by all people. These relationships, and one's role in these, is ever changing and dynamic, depending on circumstances of person, status, age, and other factors. It is vital to the Chinese in all social settings to be acutely aware of and be able to personify the correct role or part in a relationship. As opposed to the American individualistic view, in which it is the duty of the speaker to cue in the listener as to what is appropriate ground for discussion, according to Yum (1994), the Chinese communication process places the "emphasis . . . on the receiver and listening rather than the sender or speech making" (p. 83).

Communication has been discussed as being structured and interpreted on content (what) and relationship (who, when, where, why) levels. The emphasis placed on these two levels is largely decided by the particulars of cultural foundation (Damen, 1987). The cultural foundation of Chinese communication is the philosophical tradition of Confucianism, which orders content and relationships much differently than Western philosophies. The differences in philosophies are significant enough that the influences each one has on learning strategies and philosophies can sometimes impede progress being made while attempting to learn a subject based upon a different philosophical framework.

Therefore, Chinese culture has a significant impact on the strategies Chinese students use to learn English, a language that is taught by methods based upon the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the like. This can impede learning for the Chinese student not only in the ESL classroom, but in foreign language classes in China as well. Most EFL teachers today that go to China to teach have been grounded in the communicative approaches to teaching, giving no thought to using the 'outmoded' methods of years past, such as the traditional grammar-

translation method, or aspects of the audio-lingual method. These teachers, like their ESL counterparts, construct their classrooms based upon these newer pedagogies. Because of the marked differences in learning strategies based on philosophy and culture, this can have a negative effect upon Chinese students.

Bergman (1984) noted that foreign teachers usually have different expectations than their students, and that for both groups these are "inextricably bound to the reference groups of which they are members, and that the impact of language, culture, and history of both the student and teacher can affect the success of the language acquisition process in the classroom" (p. 85). As noted by Campbell & Yong (1993), if the language teacher ignores the cultural context, this will almost certainly "guarantee the failure of general teaching strategies. This failure is then either attributed to recalcitrant students or to the invalidity of communicative principles of language teaching [to Chinese students]" (p. 5).

Therefore, it is undeniably important for the ESL/EFL teacher to understand just how learning styles and expectations reflect culture and history. By having such prior knowledge of their students' background, teachers can work to circumvent any conflicts between teaching and learning styles that can impede the progress of second language acquisition. This paper will explore the philosophical framework on which the learning strategies of Chinese students are based, and will show how this structure is reflected in these strategies.

Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to point out some other factors which will sometimes have an effect on Chinese learning strategies. These include the differences between Chinese and English themselves, personal motivators, the national philosophy of education in China, or rather the cultural and political purposes of the educational system, as

well as the educational system itself in China. Of course, these last two factors are really only applicable to those Chinese that hail from the mainland, and will not be satisfactory in lending themselves as explanations for learning strategies. However, I choose to mention them briefly, as the People's Republic of China, or mainland China, has the largest population pool of possible English learners. Taiwan, Hong Kong and other geographical regions of large Chinese societies notwithstanding, the PRC has made the learning of English compulsory in senior high schools, as well as at the tertiary level. Because of this, it is helpful for ESL and EFL teachers to have a general knowledge of the educational system in which many of their students initially would have received their English instruction.

Most everyone has a general idea of what the Chinese language looks like. Instead of operating within the confines of an alphabet, it instead is composed of script characters, a good many of which are ideographic. Each character represents a syllable instead of a phonemic element, and also each character represents a morpheme. Chinese is also a tonal language, with Mandarin consisting of four true tones, and one neutral, or unvoiced tone, and Cantonese consisting of nine tones, as examples. These tones can distinguish between otherwise homophonic utterances, such as:

ma	first tone	mother
ma	second tone	hemp
ma	third tone	horse
ma	fourth tone	scold
ma	neutral tone	question marker

The characters are not the same for these words, although one can see that the basic component

exists to lend a clue to the sound of the syllable. However, there are many syllables which are homophonic even in regard to their tone markers, and in oral communication can only be differentiated by the context in which they appear. Because of this, researchers are postulating that Mandarin is becoming more of a polysyllabic language, as it has many more homophones than Cantonese, or some of the other Chinese dialects (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 14).

As for a more phonetic description of standard Chinese, Zhang (1985) gives a marvelously concise description:

> The Chinese language has 22 consonants and 10 vowels, with [sic] according to the rules of the language can be combined to form 418 syllables. With the various tones added to these syllables, a total of 1,332 syllables can be produced, although only about 400 are frequently used in everyday language, the most frequent ones comprising slightly over 100. . .There are approximately 3,700 most frequently used Chinese characters. When rounded out . . .the 2,000 most frequently used characters constitute 90 percent of the vocabulary in average modern materials. Approximately 3,000 characters include 95 percent of this vocabulary, and 3,500 characters cover 99 percent (Zhang, p. 44, p. 47-48).

It is also important to note that structurally Chinese is much different from English. While English is decidedly a SVO ordered language, Chinese contains many elements of both a SVO and a SOV ordered language. In addition, while English mainly follows the subject-predicate structure, Chinese reflects a different structure, that of topic-comment. For example, look at the comparisons of Chinese and English below:

English:	I mailed the letter.
	Subject + Predicate phrase.
Chinese:	The letter, I mailed it.
	Topic + comment phrase.

English:	My brother speaks German very well.
Chinese:	My brother, he speaks German very well.

In addition to this, much more attention is paid to the form of the written Chinese

character; this attention goes far beyond the appreciation of good penmanship in English. As opposed to the American doctor who loses no measure of respect even though his handwriting is illegible, to the Chinese, the characters which make up their language are "key vehicle[s] for presentation of the self. The appearance of one's writing [makes] evident to the reader the kind of personality one [has] and the degree to which balance and discipline were developed [in that person] . . . [a person's] characters [are] part of oneself" (Bell, 1995, p. 696). Of course, as we will see in th paper, in Chinese culture the 'self' is not looked at in isolation, but will in fact also reflect upon the relationships that the individual is involved in, as in student-teacher, child-parent, friend-friend, superior-employee, etc.

Some studies have been conducted attempting to link motivations to certain types of learning strategies (Niles, 1995; and Biggs, 1976, 1979, 1984). In today's methods books, as well, attempts are made to correlate motivation to successful language learning. Of course, motivations will always be highly varied and subject to the individual concerned. Some generalities, however, can possibly be made about Chinese learning English, when considering certain circumstances. Chinese students already studying English overseas in ESL settings probably have very high levels of motivation, as it most likely took enormous effort and cost to leave their country to study abroad to being with. These motivations will vary in origin, as in job success, family wishes, etc. These motivational factors will shift a bit when dealing with Chinese learning English as an FL. These students might want English skills to work in a joint venture company, or to read technical manuals, or are being prepared to teach English themselves in the future. As English is a mandatory subject of study in post-secondary education, however, some students might have very low motivation to learn beyond what is

needed to pass their exit examinations needed to graduate. Even so, these motivations are markedly different when compared to those of the average American foreign language student.

Some of the personal motivations listed above harken to the national philosophies of education as espoused by the Chinese government. The current view of the purpose of education is reflective of the national concerns to promote economic and technological growth. Science and technology are seen to be the keys to modernization (Pepper, 1991), with the advances made in Western fields to be studied, reduplicated, and built upon. Because of this, English is now a mandatory subject at the tertiary level of education in China, and is part of the exit examination required of all undergraduates to obtain their degrees. In fact, many Chinese students begin a mandatory program of studying English when they are 11 or 12 years old, in Junior Middle School (Wilcoxon, 1990, p. 382).

The learning of English in Chinese schools is not like foreign language learning in the United States, however. To begin with, education is much more centralized in China (Lehmann, 1975, p. 57), and blanket conformity is the norm when considering teaching methods, texts used, etc. This centralization also reflects the current political situations, which can be a problem in material selection. Texts are not chosen based on current pedagogical theories, but rather on whether the materials appropriately reflect current political attitudes (Chao, 1991, p. 15). Ideologically correct materials are considered much more important than up-to-date teaching strategies. Hence, the textbooks currently in use would be considered very outmoded by Western standards.

Unfortunately, such strong political influence in the educational system has wreaked havoc with Chinese students during the entire twentieth century. China has gone from dynastic

rule to authoritarian to colonization to communist rule to market driven socialism in a span of only 84 years. For instance, private schools flourished during the twenties under the Nationalist Government through outside funding; most all post-secondary schools were closed during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) during Communist rule, and attempts are being made now by the current government to raise the quality of instruction and the schools themselves to meet international standards, as well as to extend compulsory education to all Chinese.

Running throughout all of this turmoil, though, one can find a deep current of influence, which reflects back to the long standing philosophy of Confucianism. The teachings of Confucius, and how they are reflected in the culture of China have withstood every assault of various political powers, and while perhaps more buried today, are just as strong as they have been during the three thousand years of China's existence. It is important, then, to have a basic understanding of the traditions of Confucianism, so that they can adequately be examined as to how they influence learning strategies and decisions made by Chinese students.

Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E., during the reign of the Zhou dynasty, in the Lu province at the base of the Shandong Peninsula. His father died when Confucius was three, forcing his mother to raise him in less than ideal conditions. Even so, his mother arranged for an aristocratic education, and records indicate that Confucius was an excellent student (Hutchison, 1969). As an adult, Confucius opened a school for young men, both wealthy and impoverished. This was a new idea, as before only the children of aristocrats were tutored. Confucius, however, turned no student away based on ability to pay. The curriculum taught at his school included government, history, poetry, music, propriety and divination. One of the main thrusts

of Confucius' school was the teaching of "government service as an application of ethics to society" (Hutchison, 1969, p. 212).

It was not until later in his life that Confucius became known as a wandering philosopher. He traveled from state to state, seeking to convince a political ruler to put his political doctrine into practice (Jaspers, 1962). None would, however, and after thirteen years of wandering about Confucius returned home to Lu. He died there in 479 B.C.E., apparently disillusioned that his philosophical teaching had not been accepted by those who could best put them to use (Hutchison, 1969). After his death, however, Confucius' disciples began to collect together the sayings and remarks left behind by their teacher, and Confucius' posthumous status of philosopher quickly grew to magnificent proportions. Though quashed by the Qin dynasty in 221 - 206 B.C.E., Confucianism has been the guiding and official state philosophy of every dynasty of China since, continuing into this century.

Confucius' philosophy was concerned with pragmatic issues of ethics and government, and lacked aspects of metaphysics and spiritual issues. To understand this, one must understand the political climate into which Confucius was born. The last part of the Zhou dynasty's rule found many Chinese cities developing into culturally and linguistically distinct states, and eventually falling into the chaos of chronic warfare (Dernberger, 1991). This period is now referred to as the Warring States period, and the moral confusion of this era greatly distressed Confucius.

Confucius looked to the past for answers on how to eradicate the sufferings and social chaos of his time. He wished to restore the "rule and values of what he saw as an earlier 'golden age,'" (Dernberger, 1991, p. 5) that of Yao, Shun, and Yu, the first rulers of China, and adapt

them to fit the present era. He did not try to devise a new system of government based on the old. Confucius' main concern was the "spirit of the whole in the ethical-political state and the inner make-up of every individual man as part of the whole" (Jaspers, 1962, p. 67).

Confucian philosophy puts great emphasis on learning and formal education. Formal education is held "in great respect as meant to personal and societal improvement" (Gordon, 1987, p. 5). In fact, the civil service examination system of China, founded during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. - 202 C.E.), was based on Confucius' belief in that every man should have the chance for an education, regardless of his financial background. Once a man is educated, he can then extend his knowledge to regulating his family, governing the state, and leading the world into peace (Bergen & Mi, 1995, p. 49).

The first cardinal virtue of Confucian philosophy is that of *hsiao*, or filial piety. While this term is familiar in reference to the relationship between a child and his parents, Confucius extended this to Chinese society as a whole. He established five great relations, from which all others in life must fall (Hutchison, 1969, pp. 213-14):

(1) Kindness in the father, filial piety in the son.

(2) Gentility in the elder brother, humility and respect in the younger.

(3) Righteous behavior in the husband, obedience in the wife.

(4) Humane consideration in elders, deference in juniors.

(5) Benevolence in rulers, loyalty in ministers and subjects.

It is evident that none of these relationships are between equals. In fact, a given individual could be enmeshed in a variety of relationships at any particular moment in the life cycle. So, a man could be subject to his sovereign, father to his son, son to his father, husband to his wife, and

student to his teacher (Bond & Hwang, 1986, p. 216). Confucius believed that such a hierarchical system was essential to the harmonious well being of society. This, in turn, is reflected in the Chinese classroom. Chinese students regard their teacher as all knowing, and the absolutely authority on the subject matter. Due to the rigid teacher-student relationship, Chinese teachers are under severe pressures not to make mistakes, not to misguide students, and not to be criticized, in order to maintain their "all-knowing" and "ever-correct" status. It is the duty of students to give utmost respect to the teacher. To ask questions of the teacher, or to question the words of a teacher is tantamount to questioning the position of the teacher, and therefore is not a feature of Chinese classrooms. Since the teacher is the sole authority in the classroom, rigid order and formality are the main features of the Chinese learning environment. Thus, many Chinese teachers and students believe that the classroom is a place where serious knowledge is taught, and ways of learning that are not serious, or rather, formalized or studious should not be allowed into the classroom (Su, 1995; Ting, 1987). Many of the game and story formats promoted in communicative teaching strategies of the West have failed miserably in the Chinese FL classroom for that reason. If the teacher does not maintain this rigid authority at all times in the classroom, they will be seen as "lazy or incompetent by all concerned" (Campbell & Yong, 1993, p. 5).

This rigid structure of relationships permeates the whole of Chinese society, and so is learned at a very early age. Many Westerners believe that the emphasis in Chinese culture is put on the collective, or the group itself. Actually, the emphasis is not placed on the group, but rather on the "proper social relationships and their maintenance" (Yum, 1994, p. 76) within the group. By emphasizing the relationships themselves, the effects will indirectly lead to the

greater harmony of the whole group. When consideration is given to the individual at all in Chinese society, it is generally to the individual as a *significant reference point* for the person's value system, and hence the character of that person's relationships with others (Bergen & Mi, 1995).

The value placed on relationships is in stark contrast to American culture, which highly regards personal autonomy and individual rights. This philosophy stems from the Western philosophies of Aristotle, Locke, among others (Pratt, 1991). As Bond & Hwang (1986) have pointed out, "the Western starting point of the anomic individual is alien to Chinese considerations of man's social behaviour, which see man as a relational being, socially situated and defined within an interactive context" (p. 215). Consider how these differing viewpoints can cause considerable tension between the Western teacher constructing a dialogic, student-centered classroom, and the Chinese student who will view these very actions as heresy on the teacher's part, and will not feel that he is receiving proper instruction.

Just as individualism is the core concept of North American culture, reciprocity, reflected in the Confucian value of *jen* is at the core of Chinese culture (Yum, 1994, p. 85). The dependency formed between the relationships in this culture is considered necessary. Confucius believed that men all resembled one another in their basic humanity. However, they differ "in habits, individual character, age, stage of development, and knowledge" (Jaspers, 1962, p. 60). Therefore, man is dependent upon the other in his relationships. In the classroom, the student is dependent upon the teacher to provide him with the correct knowledge, and the teacher is dependent upon the student for absolute respect, so that he may convey that knowledge to the student. If this relationship breaks down in either direction, then its purpose, or that of

teaching/learning, will be lost. Recent work has found evidence in ancient Chinese texts that describe teachers as being treated as one of the major ethical relationships, like the main five categorized previously (Ip, 1996).

Because of the formal rigidity of Chinese classrooms, the personal feelings of the students are considered irrelevant, and improper in the classroom. As a consequence Chinese teachers will rarely ask a student's personal opinion of the material being taught. Indeed, the student does not *expect* to be asked for his own opinion, as he is there to learn from the teacher, and would not consider himself to have answers. To be asked for a personal opinion would be considered embarrassing (Hudson-Ross & Dong, 1990, p. 122).

In Confucian philosophy, one also finds the value of *cheng ming*, usually translated as the "Rectification of Names," which is a social application of knowledge. For Confucius, "names are not mere abstractions, but they signify something ideally co-ordinated with actuality. To each object, the name comes as the *designation of its being*" (Wilhelm, 1970, p. 149) (italics original). Confucius said that "if language be not in accordance with the truth of things, business cannot be carried on with success" (Hsu, 1975, p. 47). This basically means that if a name is not properly applied to an object or idea, then confusion and falsehood will dominate.

Everything has *A Right Name*, a correct label that captures the essential reality of the object (Wilcoxon, 1990, p. 391). On a surface level, this can be seen in the naming of relatives in Chinese, as different designators are used to refer to an uncle who is the mother's brother, as opposed to the father's brother, or even the maternal grandmother's brother. Each individual is given a correct name, or designator, so that harmony may be maintained within the relationship of those concerned. This concern with correct names plays a pervasive role in Confucius'

overall system (Itkonen, 1991), and so naturally is very evident in the Chinese classroom, as well.

Academic subjects, and especially foreign languages, are taught from the bottom up in Chinese classrooms. Many Western teachers have a view of Chinese foreign language learning as rote-memorization, an obsession with grammar forms, and the attention paid not to an overall structure, but rather to the structures of the words and phrases themselves. These beliefs come from this value of correct names. The correct name for each individual item must be learned first, before it is placed into a relationship with other things, so that this relationship will be harmonious and strong. Once the individual item is learned, then upon that new knowledge can be built. In Confucianism, knowledge learning is rule learning, and so to the Chinese, foreign language learning is governed by grammatical rules (Su, 1995). This is why so much emphasis is placed on the learning of complex grammar forms, and one of the reasons why the traditional grammar-translation method is still used overwhelmingly in Chinese FL classrooms. A particular example of this is known as "intensive reading," which requires the student to "read a passage, and then go over every word, phrase, punctuation mark, and sentence to find the `correct` explanation" (Reynolds, 1996). By learning individual names and rules, the student then feels that he has actually learned the material.

Memorization is a key factor in this type of learning approach. Concern for the correct name and function of particular items in order to determine their place within the network of relationships can easily be alleviated if these names and such can be automatically produced in the student. As in Western culture where learning items such as a phone number is accomplished through memorization, so is this strategy applied to all learning in Chinese

culture. First, the student starts with the name of the item, learning about the item in the sense of itself, and then once this is accomplished, the student goes on to learn its form and correct placement within its relationships, and what rules govern these relationships. As one EFL teacher in China found,

> "My students wanted me to tell them *everything*, to give them reams of notes that they could memorize . . . Outside of class, my students and I had lively, friendly conversations about all sorts of things . . . In the classroom, however, the closer we got to the material, to the subject in which I was considered 'expert,' the more nearly impossible it became to draw them out" (Wilcoxon, 1990, p. 380).

How can the ESL/EFL teacher address these differences of philosophy in their own classroom, and make them work *for* the Chinese student receiving communicative-based instruction? First, it will be of enormous help to the teacher to have the initial understanding of the philosophical concepts which underlie their students' learning strategies, and not dismiss them, as so many do, as outmoded methods which have no place in today's communicative classroom. Indeed, to slight these strategies is equivalent to call the entire Chinese culture into question, an act which would certainly alienate the Chinese student.

Instead, the teacher could point out the differences in learning and teaching strategies to the Chinese student, in an effort to help him realize that he will not face the same problems in communicative-based teaching. Also, the ESL/EFL teacher can incorporate some of the methods discussed above into the curriculum, while at the same time maintaining the communicative nature of the instruction at hand. For instance, the teacher could assign the Chinese student homework more akin to his methods of learning, thereby giving the student a 'comfort zone' in which he can operate.

As the student becomes more familiar with Western philosophy as played out in the

classroom, and can begin to contrast these methods for himself by being exposed to both at the same time, he can then begin to understand that different approaches can be used in conjunction with one another, without negative effects. By being sensitive to the cultural background of the Chinese learner, the Western teacher can play an active role in facilitating an enhanced proclivity for learning within the student.

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